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ABSTRACT

Unique in its communication effectiveness, the preaching style of George H. Morrison cannot be defined according to a particular communication classification system. Morrison's preaching reflected his deep concern for the individual person through simplicity of language, certainty of word choice, confident assertion of Scripture, and careful poetic phrasing. This same high regard for his audience appeared in his loving presentation of the truth no matter how controversial the issue, in the absence of contempt for others in his sermons, in his attempts to lead his listeners from their own interests to a broader perception of Christian concern, and in his cultivated ability to preach directly to his audience without the use of notes. Morrison's preaching was further strengthened and distinguished by his integration of Biblical texts, supported by a sound theology and his own insights into the social, individual, technological, and political issues of his day. (MAI)

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GEORGE H. MORRISON - A SCOTTISH EDWARDIAN PREACHER?

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George H. Morrison - A Scottish Edwardian Preacher?

Docherty locates the preaching of George H. Morrison in the Scottish Edwardian School of preaching. This meant, in part, references to the poets from Dante to Tennyson and to the Victorian novelists. It meant scholarly preaching and "purple passages." As Docherty observes, the Scots prided themselves in an educated ministry.[1] A reading of Morrison's sermon "The Category of Genius" would seem to bear out Docherty's judgment. Here are references to Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Milton, Dryden, Chaucer, and Spenser. Likewise the quotations from Shakespeare and the Idylls of the King which appear in his sermon "The Disolution of Doubt" appear to support this conclusion.[2]

However, if we were to use the typology for English Preaching suggested by Horton Davies for the period of 1900 to 1960 then I think Morrison's preaching would more properly be identified as "Expository" along with the preaching of Campbell Morgan and J. S. Stewart. Morrison's preaching might also be seen as having some affinities with the preaching of J. H. Jowett which Davies identified as "Devotional Preaching." Other types

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[1]The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 12-13.

[2]G. H. Morrison, The Weaving of Glory (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp. 26-29, 281.

cited by Davies are "Reasonable Preaching," "The Preaching of Truth Through Personality," "Liturgical Preaching," "Psychological Preaching," and "Apologetical and Theological Preaching."[3]

Perhaps the preferable approach would be for me to describe the preaching of George H. Morrison in some detail and then let you decide if he should be identified as belonging to the Scottish Edwardian School or if it might better be described using the Davies' typology as an "expository" or a "devotional" preacher. You might even want to conclude that he was first and foremost a "theological" preacher. Indeed you may find yourself wanting to utilize W. E. Sangster's subject matter classifications for preaching to describe Morrison's preaching as "social" or "ethical and devotional."[4]

Morrison earned his B.D. degree at the Free Church College in Glasgow. After pastorates at Thurso and Dundee he was called, in 1902, to Wellington Church in Glasgow where he served until his death in October 1928.

I first became interested in Morrison's preaching when I was asked to review a collection of his sermons published in 1960 by Harpers under the title "The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison." Docherty, in his introduction to the sermons,

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[3]Horton Davies, Varieties of English Preaching 1900-1960 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 29-34.

[4]W. E. Sangster, The Craft of Sermon Construction (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), p. 23.

wrote:

> The secret in the preaching of Morrison of Wellington is that he solved the pastor-preaching tension... He seemed to communicate through the preached word the pastoral concern he carried in his heart.[5]

While I will not describe his pastoral work, let it be clearly understood that his pastoring of his people provided an invaluable context for the hearing of his sermons. Calling in homes, nursing homes and at hospitals several hours every afternoon, personal notes posted daily, a deep caring concern for all persons were but a portion of his pastoral endeavor.

One explanation of Morrison's communicativeness on the person to person level may be the goal which he set for his preaching. Mrs. Morrison wrote in her biography of him, At the back of his mind in all his preparations for the pulpit, he seemed ever to be asking the question: 'What is there here for my people to be living on?'"[6]

A closing paragraph in his sermon "The Message of The Rainbow" bears out his wife's observation.

> And this last not least. This to lie down to sleep with and waken with when tomorrow morning breaks. This message of the bow never forget: there is mercy over the portal of God's dwelling.[7]

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[5]The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 10-11.

[6]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.), p. 48.

[7]The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers 1960), p. 42.

Now hear the concluding lines of that sermon.

> O sinful heart, prayerless and Godforgetting, there is mercy, mercy, mercy for you. The dwelling place of God is bright with it. And the heart of God is full of it. And the entreaties of Jesus Christ are throbbing with it. Who will go out into the crowded streets under the stars tonight crying for the first time for years, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'? Will you?[8]

The personal thrust of his preaching is also suggested by part of a sentence in his sermon "Near-Cuts Not Gods." "I should be very sorry ever to close a sermon without having cast for individual souls."[9]

Surely another factor in the personal quality of Morrison's preaching is the simplicity of language. One observor wrote after hearing, him preach on a Sunday evening. "The English is musical and crisp, almost entirely simple Saxon."[10]

Christina Morrison describes his efforts to preach in a language which would be understood by his people.

> ....he never found himself able to use a big word or a technical term which the simplest soul in his audience might stumble over. Anyone listening to him might think that his simplicity of language was artless and spontaneous. Doubtless it became that in the course of time, but in Thurso and in Dundee he was still endeavouring to achieve simplicity, and the end he had in view was that he might give to his people some real portion of the Bread of Life to live on.[11]

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[8]Ibid., p. 43.

[9]G. H. Morrison, Sun-Rise Addresses from a City Pulpit (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1904), p. 70.

[10]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 88.

[11]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp. 48, 49.

Reading his sermons, you also sense the certainty in choice of words which his familiarity with the Hebrew and Greek texts provides. He moves through the scriptures like a sure footed steed familiar with every turn and drop in the trail. He possesses an equal certainty in his use of English words and phrases. Undoubtedly his work as an assistant editor of the New English Dictionary helped him become a craftsman in communicating so clearly and forcefully in his own tongue.

Henry Sloan Coffin suggested that Morrison's preaching had a poetic touch. A good deal of Morrison's preaching might well be described as poetic prose. Much of the truth and the mystery of the faith can be more adequately suggested in poetry. This poetic quality contributes significantly to the communicativeness of his Sermons.

The poetry of his writing can most easily be seen in his small work The Significance of The Cross. These notes which he used for three mid-week evening addresses in October 1923 have some similarities with the printed sermons of Peter Marshall. Although there is no slanting of a series of phrases diagonally across the page, there is effective use of spacing, italicizing, capitalization, dashes, and punctuation to more nearly reflect the natural rhythm and emphasis of the spoken word. When you read these pages aloud you feel caught up in the very mood and spirit of their author. Listen to some concluding lines from the first address.

> "Now men seek to be remembered, always, by what gives fullest expression of themselves;
>
> not by the disappointments of their lives, but by the real aim and passion of their lives;
>
> by something that gathers up into itself all that they tried to be and do,
>
> and our Lord sought to be remembered by His death.
>
> Not by His miracles, though these were wonderful;
>
> not by His words, though never man spake like this Man;
>
> not by His birth or baptism or transfiguration;
>
> but by His death;
>
> and so we gather that His Cross, so far from being to Him a bitter disappointment,
>
> was the hour in which there flamed up into glory the spirit, purpose, passion of His life.
>
> He was vividly conscious of its supreme significance, or He would never have chosen it to be remembered by. He was vividly conscious that the Cross was the crown and completion of His saving ministry.[12]

In the autumn of 1968, The New York Times Book Review asked writers to write about a book they felt close to. Brigid Brophy an English novelist and critic chose The Book of Common Prayer. Toward the close of her remarks Miss Brophy wrote:

> ....liturgy is not drama, but uses a skilled blend of oratory, narrative, and contemplative passages to create its own type of movement. When I say the Prayer Book deserves to be read, I mean read aloud.... Its brilliance is all in its (very specialized) art.[13]

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[12]George H. Morrison, The Significance of The Cross (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), pp. 31, 32.

[13]Brigid Brophy "The Book of Common Prayer" The New York Times Book Review, September 15, 1968, p. 2.

Because of their poetic quality Morrison's Sermons also deserve to be read aloud.

Another important aspect of the personal communicativeness of Morrison's preaching was his high regard for his hearers. Though he cast his sermons in simple language, he did not talk down to people. A student expressing appreciation for Morrison's preaching commented "he seemed to go on the assumption that his hearer was his equal in every way."[14] His parishoners felt that he preached the truth in love, willing their good. Many of our contemporary preachers fail their people at just this point. They are in great haste to preach the truth but they do not take the pains nor have the patience to do it in love and goodwill. Yet they are surprised that their congregations have difficulty hearing them.

If you think Morrison managed this by living in a time when issues were less crucial or by avoiding the controversial issues, then you should read his sermon "Christian Patriotism." The sermon was preached in response to the high feeling raging across the land because of an attack by the Russian Fleet on British Trawlers. After disavowing noisy, blustering patriotism and citing Dr. Johnson's remark that patriotism "is the last refuge of a scoundrel" he reminds his congregation that patriotism is not exclusively a Christian virtue. Then he advances the opinion that Jesus loved his country and suggests

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[14]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd.), p. 140.

that love of country seems to run higher in small countries like Britain, Switzerland, Japan, and Palestine. Then he asks what distinguished the love which Jesus had for his country. First, there was an absence of contempt. Jesus did not scorn other nationalities nor disdain outlanders. Making a specific application of this principle Morrison (having in mind the war in Asia) declared that if one is a Christian Patriot he will never call anybody "a little yellow monkey."

The second feature of Christ's patriotism, said Morrison, "was his recognition that the worst enemies of a people are their sins." After pointing out that Christ did not spend his time hurling invective at the Romans, Morrison asserts "In the long run if a nation perishes, it is not another's guns but its own sins that ruin it." Considering that on that very weekend homes across Britain were mourning the death of sailor sons and fathers this has to be regarded as forthright preaching on a controversial issue.[15]

Neither did Morrison shrink from addressing fathers on the generation gap and admonishing them to open their minds to a few new ideas. Listen to these words from his sermon "The Larger Hospitality."

> It is amazing what cold entertainment the world has always given great thoughts, when they first come as strangers. You would have thought men would have welcomed any additions to their store; all history

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[15]G. H. Morrison, The Unlighted Lustre (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp. 93-100.

> declares it is not so.... As life advances, men get familiar thoughts just as they get familiar friends. Life crystallises. Like our set time for meals and work we get our set ways for looking at the world. And when new thoughts come, and new interpretations, we lock the strangers out. The house is full; and the great world rolls on, and we stand still. And then our sons complain that we do not understand them; we are behind the time - and they are right. I do not say it is a bad thing to be old-fashioned. I only plead for the open mind, for the receptive heart, until the end. A man may be in liveliest antagonism to the whole spirit of his age, yet clearly show that he has entertained that spirit, and understands it thoroughly. That is the point. How canst thou tell what angel thoughts thou hast repelled because they mind is barred these past ten years to all comers? 'Prove all things; hold fast that which is good,' that is the Christian attitude. By a strange irony, we mean an atheist when we say freethinker. But if the truth alone can make us free, the true free thinker is the Christian.[16]

Any preacher who would put such thoughts to a Scotch Presbyterian congregation in the early decades of this century could not be accused of obtaining a good hearing by avoiding issues or by taking the acceptable stances. No--but the people did hear him gladly because he spoke the truth in love and goodwill.

Moreover, Morrison spoke out in behalf of an inclusive church. In his sermon "The Tyranny of Type" he reminds us that in the opening of his letters to the Churches Paul was fond of addressing his converts as "saints." Obviously Paul does not intend the term to include a select few. By saints Paul means the master and the slave, the mother and the soldier in the guardroom. All the converts are Saints. Morrison goes

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[16]G. H. Morrison, Flood-Tide (London: Hodder and Stroughton) pp. 279, 280.

on to say that when we use the term saint we may be inclined to think of the love and gentleness of a mother or sister but he reminds us that Cromwell called his choicest regiment "the saints." Then he remarks,

> ....Cromwell had the right of it; he knew that for the battered soldier there was sainthood as well as for the sweet and gentle soul. I want to see room made within the church for every type and variety of character. I want to see the man of action there, and the thinker and the scholar and the labourer. And I want each to feel that in the eyes of Christ there is no favoured or peculiar type,...[17]

Once again Morrison was not courting favor but rather preaching the truth as God had given him to see the truth albeit in love and goodwill. One of Morrison's mentors in this style of preaching seems to have been Dr. John Ker who for a decade until his death on October 4, 1866 held the Chair of Practical Training for the Work of the Ministry in Theological Hall.[18] An avid reader of Ker's sermons, Morrison said for expository power, tenderness, and searching of conscience I know none quite like him.

Morrison also sought to lead his people into a wider perception of Christian concern. In his sermon "The Conflict of Duties" where he discusses the clash of right with right, he speaks of the needs of the city and the call of the slums.

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[17]G. H. Morrison, The Afterglow of God (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), p. 159.

[18]John Ker, History of Preaching (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1887), pp. v, vi.

> Over the stir and murmur of the self, voices grow audible from the distances. And first they are the voices of our wife and children, and then of the lives that need us in the city, and then of the great world that lies in bondage and waits for the redemption of Jesus Christ. Always when we are walking in the light the range of our duties is infinitely widening. If we hear new music in the summer morning, we hear new calling for succour in the dark. And how to say to every voice that claims us, 'Speak Lord, They servant heareth' is sometimes harder than to say to Simon, 'Get thee behind me Satan.' There is the call of the slums that many a man has heard. 'Come down and help us, for we need you so'....[19]

Morrison had no intention of allowing his people to set easily in their comfortable pews, and still they heard him gladly.

Another part of Morrison's effort to communicate with persons was his developed ability to preach without notes and have a nearer approach to his people. This is one quality of his preaching that can be credited to an American. One Wednesday afternoon while serving the church at Dundee, Morrison's regular preparation time for midweek prayer meeting was wholly preempted by a lengthly visit from an eminent American. With no time for preparation remaining, not even the bare minimum of a full set of notes, Morrison prayed for guidance, confessed his poverty of preparation to the congregation, and then spoke in an extempore manner on the riches of Christ. Though he looked back on that experience as suggesting a finer way of sharing with his people he hesitated to attempt it on the Sabbath. Then one Sabbath evening after service he was confiding

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[19]G. H. Morrison, The Weaving of Glory (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp. 196, 197.

his disappointment in his preaching to his assistant. His assistant suggested that he try speaking as he did at the Prayer meeting. Deciding to take his assistant's advice Morrison warned him "If I make a fool of myself next Sunday you'll be to blame." After the next Sunday's preaching he was heard to say on several occasions "Yes, that's preaching!"[20] Those who have taken a course in preaching from Bishop Gerald Kennedy know that he would support Morrison's conclusion unequivocally. Morrison mastered his sermon manuscripts and spoke without notes. Manuscripts were completed by Friday noon to make this mastery possible.

Now I want to turn to what should be considered another significant quality of Morrison's preaching - its rich Biblical character. In one sense, even this quality contributed to his effective communication with persons. The Bible became their common ground, the treasure they shared, the means of their fellowship. Contemporary analyses of religious communication to the contrary, there is no indication that Morrison's frequent and sometimes lengthly uses of Biblical materials threw up barriers to communication. As a matter of fact Morrison's familiarity with, and interest in the scripture have a kind of contagion about them. You find yourself recalling more of the context than you thought you knew and understanding more deeply

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[20]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 51.

than you thought you could. As you share sermon after sermon you find yourself growing in your knowledge and understanding of the Bible.

As a beginning I suggest that you examine his The Footsteps of The Flock. Here reprinted from the Scottish edition of the British Weekly are morning and evening homilies for fifty-two Sundays. The morning homilies taken from the Old Testament deal with texts from Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st Samuel, 2nd Samuel, 1st Kings, 2nd Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Daniel and Joshua. The evening homilies deal with texts from the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John and from the book of Acts.

Morrison consistently takes a text and frequently enriches it by reference to companion passages. He ranges readily through the whole sweep of the Bible so that his sermons are not Biblical in a narrow or restricted sense but in a grand and whole sense. This is all quite intentional.

Speaking of the community in which he began his ministry, Morrison said,

> ...it did not want cold doctrinal preaching, but it did want Biblical preaching, and I have a strong impression that that is what people always do want, although thousands of them do not know it and do not get it.[21]

In his sermon "The Young Man With The Measuring Line" we sense something of Morrison's appreciation of and faith in

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[21]Christine M. Morrison, Morrison of Wellington (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 43.

the scriptures.

> ....with deepening intensity I feel that when you have laid all human measurements on scripture you may have missed the wonder of it, and the miracle, and the living power that makes it what it is...in the living, germinating power of it I am confronted by a thing that is immeasurable....I think of all the men it has helped. I think of the weeping eyes that it has dried and of the broken hearts that it has comforted.[22]

Technology and automation have generated considerable concern in the right use of leisure time. Against this background Morrison's sermon "The Religious Use of Holidays" makes interesting reading. Morrison suggests that holidays are meant to give us back a sense of wholeness. If we learn to view them aright, we take them heartily without any qualms of conscience. He also reminds us that holidays have a social aspect. His text is taken from the 116th Psalm "Return Unto They Rest, O My Soul." Other Biblical references serve to enrich and illustrate the text. He refers to Isaiah's injunction to wait on the Lord. Israel resting while journeying in the wilderness serves as an illustration. He also speaks of Paul arguing for our liberties in Christ. We are reminded, too, that Jesus said to his disciples, "Come ye yourselves apart and rest awhile." In this last instance he asserts that their holiday would have been a failure without Christ.[23] Morrison seems to have been

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[22]The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison (New York: Harper and Stoughton), p. 43.

[23]G. H. Morrison, The Afterglow of God (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), pp. 237-250.

so familiar with the Bible that apt references came readily to mind and he deployed them skillfully through the sermon to support and illustrate his text.

Docherty declares these sermons are biblical in the best Scottish tradition. Texts are not pretexts. Rather they are springs of insight. Reading his texts in the Hebrew and Greek Morrison seemed aware of other scholarly assumptions, alternate interpretations, and variation from the original manuscript. Coffin observed that he had a genious for opening up the riches of the Bible.[24]

Another indicator of Morrison's wide and rich use of the Bible in preaching is the Index of Biblical Passages at the back of The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison. This index contains one hundred and forty-seven references from twenty-four books of the Bible.

I commend to all of you, and especially to those of you who have an interest in Biblical studies, his sermon on 2nd Peter, chapter one, verse twenty "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." Here he deals with the inspiration of the scriptures. Let me whet your appetite with this brief excerpt.

> And yet how often these old prophetic heroes lifted the voice up in the name of God and contradicted every such call. Humanly speaking, they dared to be disloyal. Humanly speaking, they advocated courses that to the

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[24]The Greatest Sermons of George H. Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 14.

> wisest seemed to lead to ruin... They crushed into dust their private prejudices. They shattered by their speech their private hopes. They flung to the winds, when they lifted up their voice, their private interest and advantages. And what I say is that if the word of prophecy had come to us solely by the will of man, the Bible would have a different tale to tell. No prophecy is of private interpretation. No one would dream it was, who knew the prophets. It is not thus even the bravest speaks when he is speaking at the call of conscience. This is the speaking of men, who in their darkness were under the moving of some mighty power, that sat enthroned above the dust of things and saw the end from the beginning.[25]

Though Morrison declared that people did not want cold, doctrinal preaching, he did engage in doctrinal preaching. A minute enacted by the General Council of the University of Glasgow on October 31, 1928 read in part "he had the gift of transforming seemingly remote doctrines into living and vivid counsels for the ways and problems of daily life." Moreover, his preaching was supported by a sturdy theology. Undergirding every sermon was the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ--His sovereighty--His judgment--His redemption--His love--His sustaining power. Always Morrison seems to be pointing to Him and saying "Come and see." Continuously he sounds the good news that we are all children of God and heirs of life eternal. The saving work of Jesus Christ is his recurrent theme.

An illustration in his sermon "The Prevenient God" has a poignant relevance for us. The sermon preached in early January emphasizes that God goes before us into the unknown land of the

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[25]George H. Morrison, The Weaving of The Glory (London: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 211.

New Year. When the king goes on a journey on the railroad, said Morrison, the line is tested in advance, officials of the road ride in the same train as the king, and a pilot train goes on ahead. One great pledge of the king's safety is in the planning and pilotage that go on before. So many of our fears are banished by the assurance that God is on ahead.[26]

Reading Morrison's description of the precautions taken and of the pilot train, I saw again the train carrying the body of the late Senator Robert Kennedy and his family, friends and dignitaries through New Jersey and the pilot train that went on ahead of it.

When the Dean of the Faculty of Theology in June 1913 presented George H. Morrison for the awarding of a Doctor of Divinity degree by his Alma Mater, the Dean concluded "Delightful to listen to, his sermons find willing publishers and a multitude of readers." This for a man who during his first year of theological studies suffered so serious an attack of pneumonia that his recovery was in doubt. Intercession was made for him in classes and two of his classmates called daily at his home to inquire about his progress.

In 1925 he was unanimously nominated as Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland. A fitting tribute to one of the Free Church's great pastor-

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[26]G. H. Morrison, The Weaving of Glory (New York: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 40.

preachers. Listen to that greatness as it rings out in the concluding paragraph of his sermon "The Vision and The City."

> You do not learn God's will by flight. The cloister is a hideous mistake. The will of God is social, not selfish; it is Our Father we are taught to pray. It is struck out for us amid the clash of lives. It is revealed in the light of our relationships. It is discovered by every task we do, and by every burden that we bravely bear. It is not when our powers are dormant that we learn God's will. It is when our powers are intensely active. It is not when we are dead to human need. It is when the cry of it rings upon our ear. It is not when the hand is withdrawn from other hands, but when it is clasped in the strong grip of comradeship, that step by step, and day by day, we come to see what God would have us do. Arise, and go into the city, and there thou shalt be told what thou must do--there where the work is, and where the burden is, and where the battle is, and the temptation--not in that cottage you have often dreamed of, where the brook is musical and where the roses bloom; but here in the city where you are tonight.[27]

Such was the preaching of George H. Morrison. It cannot, I think, be adequately described as just another example of the Scottish Edwardian School of preaching. More must be said of it than that. Surely it was Biblical. Surely it was devotional. Surely it wrestled with the social and ethical implications of Christianity for that time.

Indeed there is something about great preaching that resists every effort to place it in a neatly delineated typology or system of classification. It is both timely and timeless--both individual and social--both word of God and word of man--both foolishness and salvation--both revelation and mystery.

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[27]G. H. Morrison, The Afterglow of God (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), p. 129.